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Diversity and inclusion depend on effective engagement

It is everyone's business to ensure that progress is maintained

By Chandana Sanyal, Dr Doirean Wilson, Charlotte Sweeney, Dr Jude Smith-Rachele, Satwant Kaur and Christine Yates

Abstract

Purpose – *Highlights some of the things that can be done to ensure that organizations embed diversity and inclusion.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Considers the need for effective engagement, the importance of performance indicators for diversity and inclusion and the key role of sharing stories. Discusses, too, how critical race theory could help to bring about improvements.*

Findings – *Advances the view that a transformational process that supports employees with the knowledge and sustainable skills needed to improve business performance via ethical means will form a significant part of future-proofing organizations.*

Practical implications – *Argues that, to achieve this organizations have to drive home the message that diversity and inclusion are everyone's business.*

Social implications – *Advances the view that a unified approach to diversity and inclusion, which is embedded in the business ethics of the organization, can have a sustainable positive impact on the health and well-being of individuals, business and society.*

Originality/value – *Considers diversity and inclusion from diverse perspectives and draws conclusions that can help organizations to perform better in these areas.*

Article type: General review

Keyword(s): Equal opportunities; Diversity; Inclusion; Organizational performance; Corporate culture

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace are increasingly accepted as fundamental business tools in today's organizations. This is because businesses are gradually beginning to recognize that their potential to achieve better results is increased when people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives are included at different levels of the organization, including in the decision-making process. However, many organizations still struggle with how to effectively implement a robust diversity and inclusion agenda and embed it into their business plan.

The need for effective engagement

The growth in globalisation in today's society has resulted in communities and organizations that are now more heterogeneous. An increase in foreign investment, trading and cross-cultural team-working and interactions are characteristics of the day. This, coupled with a change in social attitudes toward individuals and groups who would otherwise be stigmatized, are some of the reasons why there needs to be effective engagement in diversity and inclusion.

Nurturing engagement for inclusivity is subject to a range of factors. They include: the need to uncover unconscious biases that are likely to be manifest in behaviours that can be perceived as discriminative although this might not be what was intended; the need for a cultural change so that employees at all levels can understand why engagement is imperative to business success; and the need to conduct reality checks of corporate-employee demographics to promote awareness of differences and to nurture equality and social justice in the workplace.

Performance indicators for diversity and inclusiveness

A survey conducted as part of a power-of-diversity program (www.thepowerofdiversity.com) by Charlotte Sweeney Associates (www.charlottesweeney.com) highlighted that 87 percent of city workers do not believe that their company's efforts on diversity and inclusion have any impact on them at all. The survey also showed that although employers may have made a commitment from the top of their organization to create a diverse and inclusive workforce, leaders' and managers' actions are often not consistent with this.

Furthermore, diversity and inclusion are often seen as a leadership or HR initiative and, although most employees may know about them, they are not fully engaged. One reason highlighted in the survey was the lack of specific diversity and inclusive performance indicators in the performance-management system or other mechanisms to hold people accountable. This could hinder the ability of organizations to engage their workforce.

Another clear message from the survey was that respondents recognized that diversity and inclusion are everyone's business and as such, it is everyone's responsibility to adopt a collective approach in order to drive a diversity and inclusivity culture in organizations.

The diversity survey provides organizations that are committed to the diversity and inclusion agenda with a framework for engagement. For example, Barclays has deployed a global diversity and inclusion strategy, which plays a significant part in its balanced scorecard. Similarly, Accenture's global inclusion and diversity strategy – which promotes stewardship, best people, client value creation, one global network, respect for the individual and integrity as its core values – is central to the business.

Sharing stories can be more compelling than data

Nonetheless, although senior-level commitment and a strategy are the first steps in this engagement process, the implementation and embedding of a culture that supports the strategy is a challenge for most organizations.

Here, organizations committed to the diversity and inclusion agenda can start by exploring contemporary diversity and inclusion issues through in-depth employee interviews. These stories can be transformed into theatre scenarios and can be used as training tools to show the subtle and indirect nature of unconscious biases that may exist in people.

Such awareness-raising initiatives can provide organizations with practical solutions to improve performance and encourage a balanced dialog regarding compliance, business priorities and ethical values in organizations.

Story-telling is also a means for uncovering stereotypes by identifying those that are based on fact and others based on fiction. This approach can help to address the myths and misconceptions around difference in cultures in a non-threatening way, which supports the process of learning.

Organizations may need to consult specialists with expertise in the areas of diversity and inclusion to help them to find out how to use real-life scenarios in order to appropriately drive their business ethics.

Leaders of diversity and inclusion can be anywhere in your business

As an organization's culture cannot be driven solely by its senior leaders and line managers and needs the engagement of all members of staff there needs to be recognition that this should also be the case for diversity and inclusion. Employees as key resources are stakeholders and therefore have a duty of care to drive diversity in order to ensure that all can feel included. This arguably is subject to being valued and respected by the employer and colleagues. But an ability to respect others depends on understanding what respect means for them.

Doirean Wilson conducted a recent study that explored what final-year undergraduate business students, working together in diverse teams to address real business issues, meant by respect. The study revealed that the term respect is a core commonly shared value for all regardless of, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, social class or status.

Doirean Wilson's study also revealed that respect is a culturally situated value. Therefore giving it is subject to understanding what it means for those of cultural difference and knowing how it shows itself in their behaviour. She used these research insights to develop learning strategies that helped to address conflict among multicultural work-teams. This promoted team harmony and commitment, boosting learning and performance.

A critical race perspective

Critical race theory (CRT) was the focus of Christine Yates's presentation. She confirmed that the concept emerged in America in the 1970s in response to lawyers, activists and legal scholars' realizing that apparent gains from the civil rights movement had stalled. As in the UK, previous (legal) victories have been eroded and advances rolled back. Equally true for the UK is that "...anti-racist research and

policies have proved unable to keep pace with increasingly racist and exclusionary ... policies that operate beneath a veneer of professed tolerance and diversity" (David Gillborn, IOE).

The CRT movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. CRT could be a method for proofing against institutional discrimination if the will is there. It centers on black voices and experiences, using a participatory approach, metaphors and story-telling to convey truths. However, as long as public-sector institutions continue to flout compliance and do nothing meaningful to eradicate institutional discrimination (see *Snowy White Peaks*, by Roger Kline, where statistics show worse abuse after years of equalities legislation) the outlook for the future remains bleak for BME (black and minority ethnic) populations.

Supporters of CRT suggest that it can be applied in organizations to explore and understand issues and incidents related to equality and diversity. When applied in the context of examining organizational structures and decision-making processes with a view to enhancing the diversity and inclusion agenda, it can be used as a social discourse to create mechanisms for hearing and properly responding to the voices and experiences of staff and service users from diverse race and ethnic backgrounds. This can be achieved, for instance, by properly implementing equality impact assessments, equality-delivery frameworks and monitoring systems and acting responsibly on the findings.

Conclusion

The creation of a unified approach to diversity and inclusion, which is embedded in the business ethics of the organization, can have a sustainable positive impact on the health and well-being of individuals, business and society. Abundant Sun, a global organizational-diversity consultancy (www.abundantsun.com) offers a structured transformational process that enables organizations to enhance performance and achieve business improvement drive while making a real contribution to its diversity and ethical outcomes.

With austerity measures now in place across much of Europe, organizations are challenged to achieve sustainability and inclusive growth. A transformational process that supports employees with the knowledge and sustainable skills needed to improve business performance via ethical means will form a significant part of future-proofing organizations. To achieve this organizations have to drive home the message that diversity and inclusion are everyone's business.

Note

Chandana Sanyal and Dr Doirean Wilson are HRM senior lecturers (practice) in the Leadership, Work and Organizations Department at Middlesex University, London. Charlotte Sweeney is founder and director of Charlotte Sweeney Associates Ltd, specialist in inclusion, diversity, well-being and change Dr Jude Smith Rachele is chief executive and co-founder of Abundant Sun. Satwant Kaur is an equalities consultant. Christine Yates is an equality and diversity consultant.

Box-out quotes

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